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Interview highlights

'They wanted to separate me from my family': Mahmoud Khalil speaks after ICE release

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HEARD ON MORNING EDITION



Leila Fadel

[7-Minute Listen](#)[PLAYLIST](#)[TRANSCRIPT](#)

Former Columbia University student and pro-Palestinian protest leader Mahmoud Khalil, accompanied by his wife Noor Abdalla, arrives for a press conference outside the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York on June 22, 2025, two days after his release from US custody.

After 104 days in a Louisiana immigration detention center, Columbia graduate student Mahmoud Khalil has been released on bail.



IMMIGRATION

Columbia activist Mahmoud Khalil released on bail

Khalil, a legal permanent resident married to a U.S. citizen, has become the face of the Trump administration's crackdown on student protesters opposing Israel's war in Gaza. He was the first of several students across the U.S. who were detained and threatened with deportation. Khalil was taken by immigration agents outside his New York City home in early March and detained in Louisiana.

While other students were released from detention, the Trump administration kept Khalil behind bars in Louisiana. During this time, he missed the birth of his first child. When he flew back to New Jersey over the weekend, Khalil was met with cheers as he pumped his fist into the air.

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Today he's reunited with his family in New York. He spoke to *Morning Edition* host Leila Fadel about his arrest, his time in detention and why he believes the government targeted him for protesting U.S. support for the war in Gaza.

This interview was lightly edited for length and clarity.

Interview highlights

Mahmoud Khalil: It felt like kidnapping, to be honest. You have plainclothes agents in unmarked cars, not identifying themselves, claiming to have an arrest warrant that they did not show. At no point did I know where I was going. I only knew that I was flying to Louisiana the moment we boarded the plane. It was a very difficult experience, being disconnected from everything, being shackled all the time during transport, except on the airplane, where I had two ICE agents basically surrounding me, making sure I didn't look at the news, didn't communicate with anyone, surveilling me the entire time. For almost 30 hours, until I arrived in Louisiana, I was fully disconnected from the world.

Fadel: What were the conditions like at the detention facility where you were being held all this time?

Khalil: The conditions inside were very dire. For the first week, I believe, I did not eat much. The food is inedible. It was very cold. Back in March, you get only one blanket while it is, I believe, around 60 degrees. You have no privacy whatsoever, sort of sleeping with over 70 men in the room, and no one explaining to you what's happening or what will happen. Many of them are confused about why they ended up in such a place. Although, I mean, most of them are in the country without documentation. But still, does that warrant their indefinite arrest?

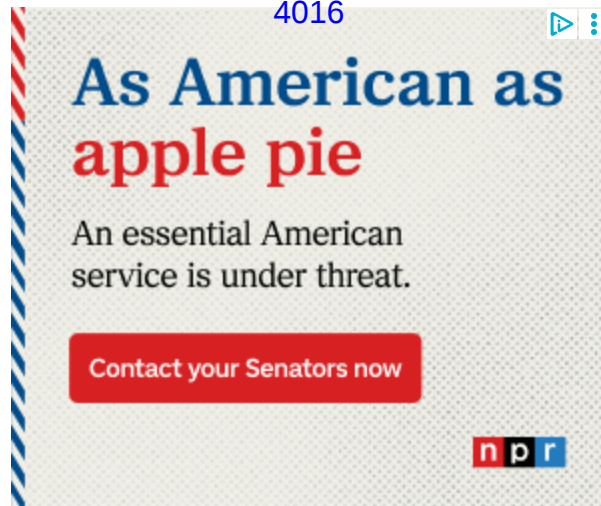


NATIONAL

'I think he knew': Mahmoud Khalil's wife on his detention and her search for answers

Fadel: You missed the birth of your son, your first child. What was it like reuniting with your wife Noor and holding your son for the first time?

Khalil: Missing the birth of Deen, I believe that was the most tragic event that happened to me in my life, and last month, after so much pressure, they allowed me to hold him for an hour. So this time felt, of course, different. It's just very mixed feelings, to be honest.



Fadel: What do you mean? Mixed feelings?

Khalil: I was in shock, like, is this really happening? Am I daydreaming? I also had mixed feelings about the hundreds of fathers in the detention center, there is absolutely no reason why they cannot hold their children in some way. I felt that I had defeated Trump. This is what they wanted to do, they wanted to separate me from my family, but they failed.

Fadel: Can you say more about that? I mean, this is an administration that has said very clearly that they think that the protests are bad, that they're antisemitic and that they will continue to deport and detain students.

Khalil: They want the protests to stop because they expose this administration's and this government's hypocrisy when it comes to human rights, when it comes to self-determination. That's why they wanted them to stop. But of course, it's not only about Palestine. In my case, they weaponized the immigration system to achieve what they wanted to, which is to chill speech. And Trump basically thinks that he creates the law and people should follow. So the fact that the federal judge ordered my release meant that Trump is basically no king.



INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

DHS official defends Mahmoud Khalil arrest, but offers few details on why it happened

Fadel: The administration, the Department of Homeland Security, has already tweeted that they filed an appeal of your release. So far, the government has not accused you of breaking any laws in court documents. But administration officials

have repeatedly said on our air, on other broadcast media outlets, and in newspapers that you were involved in antisemitic activities, that you were agitating and supporting Hamas. Have they shown you or told you specifically what you said or did that they claim constitutes supporting Hamas or inciting antisemitism?

Khalil: They absolutely showed me nothing. They had over 100 days to do that, and I dare Trump, [Marco] Rubio, and their administration to substantiate these claims with anything, because they did not refer to anything. Even when they say I distributed the flyers, okay, show us the photos of me doing that. Just the bare minimum. What they're relying on is hateful rhetoric, trying to portray me as a villain, as a violent person, so that people don't actually look at what I was doing, what I was saying, what my values are, what my speech is about. And that's why they used the immigration system — because if they had a case, they would have gone through the criminal system or the civil system. But they know they don't have a case. They entirely control the immigration system. They had to go all the way back to 1952 to justify my deportation.

Fadel: Which is this immigration act that says, the Secretary of State, can remove a person that they deem adverse to foreign policy.

Where does your case stand?

Khalil: My release is just the first step. The legal fight is still very, very long. The administration appealed the decision about my release, but we will prove our case

– that what happened to Mahmoud Khalil was textbook retaliation against the First Amendment, that I was targeted because of speech the government did not like, and that there was nothing wrong with the speech I was engaged in. I want to make sure that everyone who contributed to my arrest will be held accountable. That's something I'm also looking forward to because now I can defend myself. While in detention, the administration refused any opportunity for me to speak to the media, because they knew they had no case. They were basically afraid of my voice.

Fadel: You mean they actively stopped you from speaking to journalists while in detention.

Khalil: Yes, they did. A number of media outlets reached out to the facility asking for interviews with me, but they basically either denied or ignored those requests. So I had to rely on reciting op-eds over the phone in order to get my voice out. Because what was happening is, the administration was talking about me, telling people who Mahmoud Khalil supposedly is, but they weren't giving me the chance to actually tell my story.

Fadel: Do you think you'll be able to stay with your family?

Khalil: I will fight to do that, as everyone should be with their families. That's why I'm standing up against this administration: to remain with my family, but also to give other children a chance to be with theirs. U.S. tax dollars are now being used to kill fathers and babies back in Palestine. They're being used to separate families here in the United States, under the watch of everyone. That's what I will continue fighting.

Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement that Khalil's detention was legal. That's currently being battled out in court.

She also wrote that Khalil, a legal permanent resident, "should use the CBP Home app to self-deport. The United States is offering illegal aliens \$1,000 apiece and a free flight to self-deport now."

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson said in a statement "we expect to be vindicated on appeal, and look forward to removing Khalil from the United States."

The government is accusing Khalil in court of lying on his green card application, something Khalil disputes.

The White House, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security did not address our questions on why Khalil was not allowed to speak to reporters while in detention nor did they provide evidence for their claims that Khalil supports anti-American causes, the Palestinian militant group Hamas or that he incited antisemitism.

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